



DOWNTON SHOOT

Though the perfect shoot does not exist, some come very close. This is one of them.

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Things started, as they so often do, the night before. There is a lot to be said for a team get-together on the eve of shoot day, and while things can get a little fuzzy if you forget your self-discipline, vivid memories as pleasurable as a left and right or perfect retrieve to hand can be conceived whether there are five or 50 in the group. On these occasions in the past I've picked apart Michael Douglas's performance in *Wall Street* with a hedge-fund manager over port and cigars in a Scottish lodge at 3am, almost burned my eyebrows off watching French farmers cook mussels on a white-hot pyre of hay, and even proved not all Welshmen can sing during a truly awful rendition of *Happy Birthday* in my native tongue to a group of Yorkshire guns.

While there are many more adventures safely locked away in my head, nothing has come close to Bob Spall's one-man show under the wooded beams of Old Downton Lodge. Namely the recital of a story about someone being caught on the bridge of the USS America at 3am.

It was a well-rehearsed ditty delivered while encircled by close friends who, though they'd heard it before, couldn't hide the giggles as Bob lifted his heel and cocked his neck in the style of a Louisiana madam, all the time hollering in a pitch-perfect Southern accent. For the sake of

The unforgettable Tennis Courts, where birds were gone in the blink of an eye.

decency we can't print the whole story, but suffice to say 'leastwise' is my new favourite word and it was worth my laughing fit just to see the others crying while tapping their feet to Bob's dramatic, curling vowels. Had there been more space I'm sure we'd have followed him around the room like the Jets at the start of *West Side Story* as Bob "fled down 33rd Street clad only in my shirt-tails".

I had journeyed to Downton, around nine miles west of Ludlow, at the request of Christopher Lyons, a gentle-mannered

"A mixture of gorges, tight river valleys, rolling hills and far-reaching views."

sporting agent who had put me with a team of regulars led by Derbyshire-based Joss Read, a businessman who has visited the shoot over 200 times.

There have been superb days and others that could have gone better, but Christopher, a firm believer in his shoot only being as good as its last day, will always operate from the sidelines without making you feel like you're on your own the moment you're on your peg. This is partly thanks to the fact you have your own loader. When Christopher first mentioned ▶

SHROPSHIRE



The keeping team at Downton consists of Dan Morton (left), Lee Alford, headkeeper Bob Bower & Lewis Webb.

“Enhancing the good drives and abandoning poor ones has been key.”

and it shows. When Christopher first arrived, Downton offered 52 small days but this has been reduced to 40 in a bid to increase its economic viability and the length of the day itself.

“Enhancing the good drives and abandoning the poor ones has been key,” said Christopher. “In some cases,



Sporting agent Christopher Lyons has been at Downton since the early 1990s.

this has been hard to achieve, but I relied heavily on George Goldsworthy, who was headkeeper when I arrived. It was fascinating to watch George choosing new drives. He had an innate ability to imagine how a pheasant would see things. At times, he looked like a cock pheasant himself as he went round looking at potential drives!”

Guns have benefited from the management’s ingenuity, too. On Cophall Valley I started as a walking gun, with Stuart and I strolling steadily along a stone track half way up a wooded hillside, keeping pace with the beaters to my left. I’m a sucker for left-to-right crossers and thanks to Stuart’s keen eyes and ears I had already enjoyed my fair share of sport by the time I joined the back of the line some 200 yards farther onward, at the base of a steep bank covered in birch.

As if to announce my arrival there was soon plenty of shooting right across the valley when I took up a new, more permanent position in the line, with both guns and loaders needing the fingers of John Entwistle to keep up once the birds came *en masse*.

The Shropshire landscape was lit throughout the day by a muffled December sun that cast gentle shadows across a canvas of warm browns, reds, oranges and yellows. Each of the

it I was put temporarily on the back foot (my concentration suffers when I am observed, as Ichabod Crane once noted). However, it soon turned out that loaders are as valuable to the guns as the cartridges being slotted into barrels. My host already knew this, of course.

A symphony in the sky

Christopher, who arrived at Downton in 1990 just after its current French owners had bought the estate, has seen

the shoot grow from a respectable 1,800 acres to an impressive 5,000 acres during his tenure, the ground a mixture of gorges, tight river valleys, rolling hills and far-reaching views into Wales and England. Many of the estate’s formerly derelict houses and farm buildings, including Old Downton Lodge, have also been completely transformed by local builders and craftsmen, and on the shooting side Christopher has been aided by Yorkshireman Bob

Bower who, according to his boss, has a “flair for gamekeeping and man-management”.

Bob, who relies heavily on the behind-the-scenes work of his wife Amanda, is only the second headkeeper to have served at Downton since its current owners arrived, and this consistency is something the shoot prides itself on. A great deal of care and attention has been paid to all aspects of the shoot day, but before that starts to

The day opened on Standleean, which set the standard for what was to follow.

sound like a line from an advert, I’d be willing to bet this kind of fine tuning is a result of learning from errors and listening to suggestions from guests.

This has helped Christopher and Bob, who meet once a week outside the shooting season, to offer such a well-rehearsed experience at Downton. All the keeping team are said to be really enthusiastic about the shoot



Andy Seward took one of the birds of the day on Cophall Valley.

drives was completely independent from the other both in terms of topography and sporting challenge they presented. Christopher certainly had a few ideas up his sleeve to make things interesting, including on Standledean where several guns were pegged up

the top of a bank that curled back and around on itself. And thank God for Stuart, who was able to predict with frightening accuracy the flight lines that the soaring ringnecks would follow once they broke over the chestnut tree half way up this frozen landslide



Bill Burleigh makes a note of things between drives.



The affable and imaginatively attired Robert Ford.

“If you’re on peg five you can watch salmon leaping up the weir in autumn.”

of grass and bracken. If anyone has ever told you you can’t multi-task you can get your revenge by sending them here. The positioning of the guns and the angles at which the birds flew meant every gun had plenty of shooting, either at their own birds or at those that would have belonged to a neighbour had they not been reloading or concentrating on another.

While preparing for this article I was reminded of Will Ashby’s comment about Whitfield that you wouldn’t book a day there if you wanted to protect your averages. You could say the same about Downton. Christopher suggested that 5:1 is the average ratio here, and one could tell that Joss and the rest of the guns had been here before just by the way the birds were folding by the time barrels had reached a 90° angle.

Possibly the world’s most disorientating drive

I have a scribbled line in my notebook that likens the shooting on the last drive, Tennis Courts, to “being on a merry-go-round that changes direction and speed the second you pull the trigger”. It’s a drive where guns stand with their backs to the meandering River Teme, its black and white ribbons charging furiously along if the current is strong enough. If you’re on peg five you would be able to watch salmon leaping up the weir in autumn, one of Christopher’s favourite things about this drive.

At times I had to try hard not to break into my own brand of acrobatics to avoid plunging, back first, into the icy water, such was my will to see my bird before it saw me. Seriously, it was



Joss Read has been a regular visitor to Downton over the years.

as though they were on hairpin tracks once they had broken over the cliffs and high across the river. Lessons on line and lead came faster than I could think. They didn’t look like pheasants, only black scratches in the sky that disappeared in a second. When the whistle blew to signal the end of it all, I was emotionally and physically drained, struggling to help Stuart collect the cartridges scattered around and about our feet, but I’d have had another go in a heartbeat.

I spotted Bob Bower and his team as we drifted back to the vehicles and he seemed pleased with the way the day had gone, particularly its conclusion. The Downton headkeeper once told Christopher that he never needs to go away on holiday, such is the beauty of the Downton Estate, and it’s a sentiment I can appreciate.

In July I was privileged to be able to say that I had been part of the



The birds at Downton will pose a challenge to new teams.

On the shoot



Loader Tony Dixon with gun William Dilks.

Shooting Gazette team for exactly 10 years. In that time, I have met all manner of curious, warm, inspirational and flamboyant characters, many of whom have welcomed me into their inner circle with the kind of generosity shown to an old friend. I have learned many lessons, both harsh and valuable, about the countryside, our sport, manners, excess, ignorance and even arrogance along the way.

In the run up to July's milestone I got to thinking about the top three shoots I had visited with either shotgun or pen and paper in hand. Whether Downton is or will ever be in your own list only you can say, but if there were ever a trip where I had wished that every *Shooting Gazette* reader could have been present to share each moment with me, and absorb everything else that even my own brand of verbose reportage had missed, it would be this one. 🐦

For more information about the shooting at Downton, visit downtonshoot.com or contact Christopher Lyons on 01531 636321.

The area guide

How to get there, where to stay and what to eat.



TRAVEL

The Downton shoot is not connected in any way to a certain popular TV series, and therefore is nowhere near north Yorkshire and has no connection to Highclere Castle. It is, however, around six miles to the west of the A49, which feeds into the M50 and M49, both of which lead to the M5, making the journey in and out a pleasant one. Don't be concerned with not being able to find the shoot lodge on the satnav, simply tap 'Downton-on-the-Rock' into your system and keep your eyes peeled when you're a few hundred metres away from it. Bucknell to the west and Ludlow to the east are the nearest railway stations.

STAY

The obvious choice for guns looking to stay near the shoot would be Old Downton Lodge. As we reported in our review of the lodge in the February issue, the facility is bursting with old English character and is both perfect and well used to catering for large shooting parties who like to enjoy themselves ahead of a day in the field (olddowntonlodge.com). If you are struggling to get into the lodge and don't mind hopping in the car, then the 12-bedroom Castle Hotel, which is 30 minutes away in Bishop's Castle, is a strong second option (thecastlehotelbishopscastle.co.uk).

CATERING

Guns are spoiled but not spoiled rotten at Downton. We started the day with a comprehensive breakfast at Old Downton Lodge before heading over to the shoot lodge for the briefing and later dinner. The shoot lodge has been given the same care and attention as the rest of the shoot.

There is a calming atmosphere under its beamed ceilings, ideal after such an exhilarating day in the field. Guns passed sausage rolls, sandwiches and other comforts around during elevenses and had plenty of vegetables and refreshments to go with the local lamb come the day's end.